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The experiences of participants in ESF funded training programmes

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Introduction

This paper presents findings from an investigation into the experiences of people who participated in training programmes in Wales, between 2009 and 2013, which were supported by the European Social Fund (ESF). The two ESF Operational Programmes (referred to as the Convergence and Competitiveness Programmes) benefiting Wales for the programming period 2007-13 provided just over £1.4 bn¹ of investment, with approximately 85% of this channelled through the West Wales and the Valleys Convergence Programme. Whilst wide ranging in their remit, the interventions supported by the Programmes related to investment in human capital.

The 2009-2013 Combined Analysis of ESF Leavers Surveys was conducted by an inter-disciplinary research team led by Cardiff University on behalf of the Welsh European Funding Office

(WEFO)². The aim of the ESF Leavers Surveys is to assist in assessing the effectiveness of labour market interventions delivered under the ESF. This paper describes the findings from the combined analysis of data from five successive Leavers Surveys, covering the period 2009 – 2013, undertaken to facilitate more detailed analysis for population sub-groups. In total a sample of 23,769 interviews from ESF participants (identified as having left an ESF project during the years 2009-2013) were used for the Combined Analysis.

The interventions covered by the ESF survey fall under two broad categories; those aimed at increasing employment which primarily support those not in work (Convergence Priority 2; Competitiveness Priority 1) and those aimed at increasing skills among those in work (Convergence Priority 3; Competitiveness Priority 2). A broad typology of projects was developed by the Welsh European Funding

Office (WEFO) and the research team, across which responses from different groups of survey respondent could be compared and contrasted. These categories are described in Table 1.

Given the scale of the investment, an evaluation of the impact of measures supported by the Programmes is important. The surveys collected information on: the pre-entry characteristics of ESF participants; their motivations for participation; the skills acquired as a result of the intervention and details of the careers of respondents since completing the project. Employment outcomes, 'softer' benefits from learning (such as increased confidence) and entry into further learning was also identified. The interviews included questions to explore participants' levels of satisfaction with their courses, and their perceptions of the benefits they experienced as a result of participating in an ESF project.

Table 1: Typology of ESF projects

Group	Description
Increasing Employment	
E1 Training (Basic/Non-Occupational)	Projects offering training in essential skills (reading, writing, IT etc.) and lower level qualifications (NVQ 3 and below) not related to specific occupational training.
E2 Redundancy Training	Projects with a specific focus on training pre and post redundancy. It was decided that this should remain a distinct category as participants are in such specific circumstances (e.g. highly 'work ready' etc.)
E3 Employability Support	Support for targeted groups with specific barriers to working. Projects focused on pre-employment job search and soft skills development.
E4 Work Placements	Projects using work placements or short term employment.
E5 Engagement Signposting	Careers advice, support and training to successfully apply for jobs.
Increasing Skills	
S1 Training (Basic/Non-Occupational)	Projects offering training in essential skills (reading, writing, IT etc.) and lower level qualifications (NVQ 3 and below) not related to specific occupational training.
S2 Occupational Training	Training focused on specific industries.
S3 Apprenticeships	Projects using apprenticeships as a route to training and development as well as a method of gaining work experience.
S4 Policy Area Project	Projects which focus on promoting a particular policy area, through individuals and organisations.
S5 Graduate Work Placements	Projects using work placements or short term employment to develop skills.
S6 Leadership and Management	Training focused on developing leadership and management skills.

What had participants been doing prior to starting their ESF course?

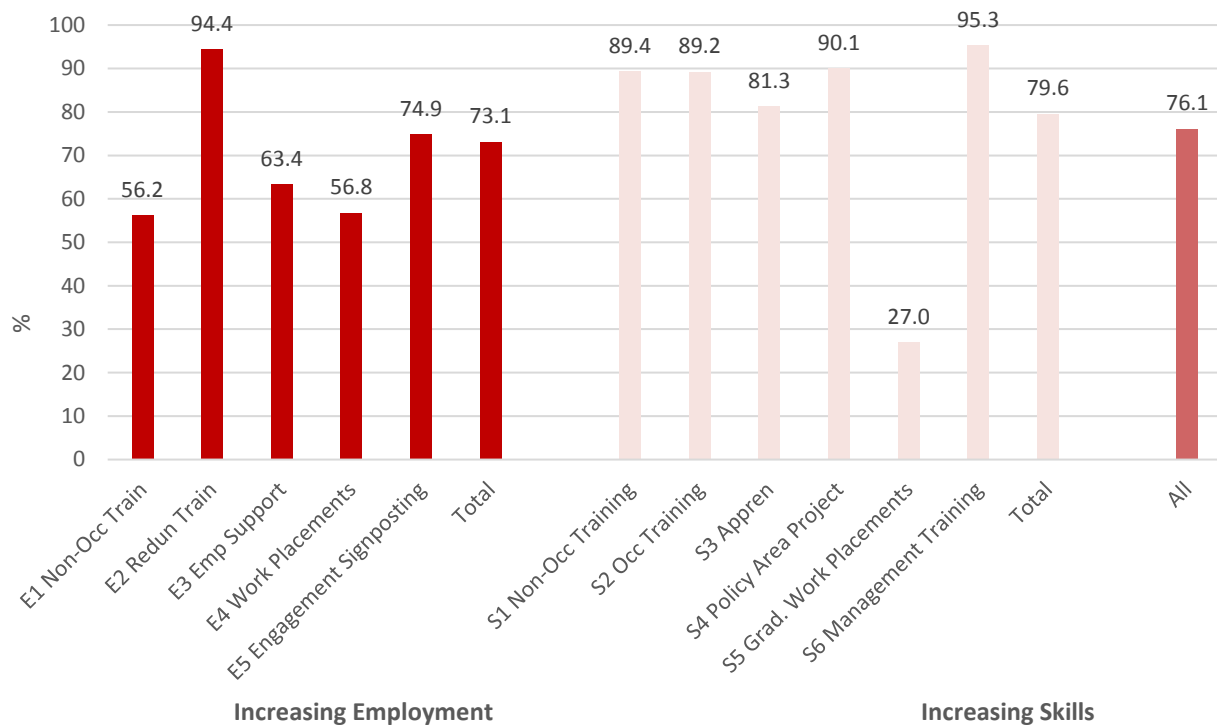
The labour market circumstances of ESF respondents since completing full-time education are presented in Figure 1. Approximately 7 out of 10 respondents reported that they had been either continuously or mostly in paid employment since full-time education. Figure 1 indicates that among the Increasing Employment project types, participants of Non-Occupational Training (E1) report among the lowest labour

market attachment. A possible contributing factor here is the relatively young age of participants and their consequent lack of previous labour market experience. Abstracting from the particular circumstances surrounding participants in Redundancy Training (E2), respondents from Engagement Signposting (E5) projects report the highest labour market attachment of all the Increasing Employment project types. They were

generally older with relatively high levels of education compared with the Increasing Employment average. In the Increasing Skills project types, participants in Graduate Work Placements (S5) report the lowest labour market attachment. This reflects a lack of prior labour market experience related to their young age and their previous participation in full-time education prior to ESF.

Figure 1: Labour market attachment prior to ESF

(% mostly or continuously in work since completing full time education)



The findings presented in Figure 1 could suggest that the intended targeting of the ESF interventions aimed at improving participation in the labour market on those who face the greatest difficulties in finding work has not occurred. However, it must also be acknowledged that some of those who face the greatest difficulties in finding work may simply remain on the schemes and not become eligible for inclusion in a 'Leavers' survey.

Why do people undertake ESF supported training?

The main reasons given for undertaking an ESF course were "to help get a job" or "to improve or

widen career options". The breakdown by project type are presented in Figure 2. The reasons provided by respondents naturally reflect the groups targeted by specific types of intervention. Nearly two-fifths of respondents (37%) participating in projects aimed at improving participation in the labour market stated that they undertook the course in order to help them find work.

By project types, the findings on the main reasons for undertaking an ESF project followed a broadly similar pattern to those found in the priority level analysis. However, there were some noteworthy differences. In the Increasing

Employment theme the proportion of respondents stating that the main reason was to help get a job ranged from 30% for Non-Occupational (E1) projects to 45% for Work Placements (E4). Just 1% of respondents in the Management Training (S6) projects under the Increasing Skills theme stated that their main reason for participating in an ESF project was to help get a job, whereas 22% on Graduate Work Placements (S5) stated this reason. Respondents from Non-Occupational Training projects were most likely to state that their main reason for undertaking an ESF project was to learn for personal interest (10% of those on the Increasing Employment (E1) project;

12% of those on the, Increasing Skills (S1) project).

What difficulties do people face in finding work?

Survey respondents who were out of work prior to their ESF course were asked about the main difficulties that they faced in finding work. The main reason most frequently cited by previously unemployed respondents was a lack of appropriate jobs where they lived (39%) (Figure 3). A lack of qualifications or skills, and lack of relevant work experience were cited by 14% and 12% of previously unemployed

respondents respectively. Among those who were economically inactive prior to ESF, health problems (23%) or having care responsibilities (17%) were cited as the main issues they faced in finding work.

What skills do people gain from ESF supported training?

The most commonly cited skills acquired by respondents during their ESF project were communication skills (74%). Other commonly cited aptitudes gained include key skills such as team working skills (72%) and organisational skills (also 72%).

Three quarters of respondents gained a qualification as a result of their participation in ESF training. Participants in interventions aimed at increasing skills are more likely to achieve a qualification (80%) than those aimed at increasing employment (71%). ESF interventions have contributed to increasing levels of educational attainment, with the largest improvements in attainment being among those on apprenticeships.

Figure 2: Reasons for undertaking ESF

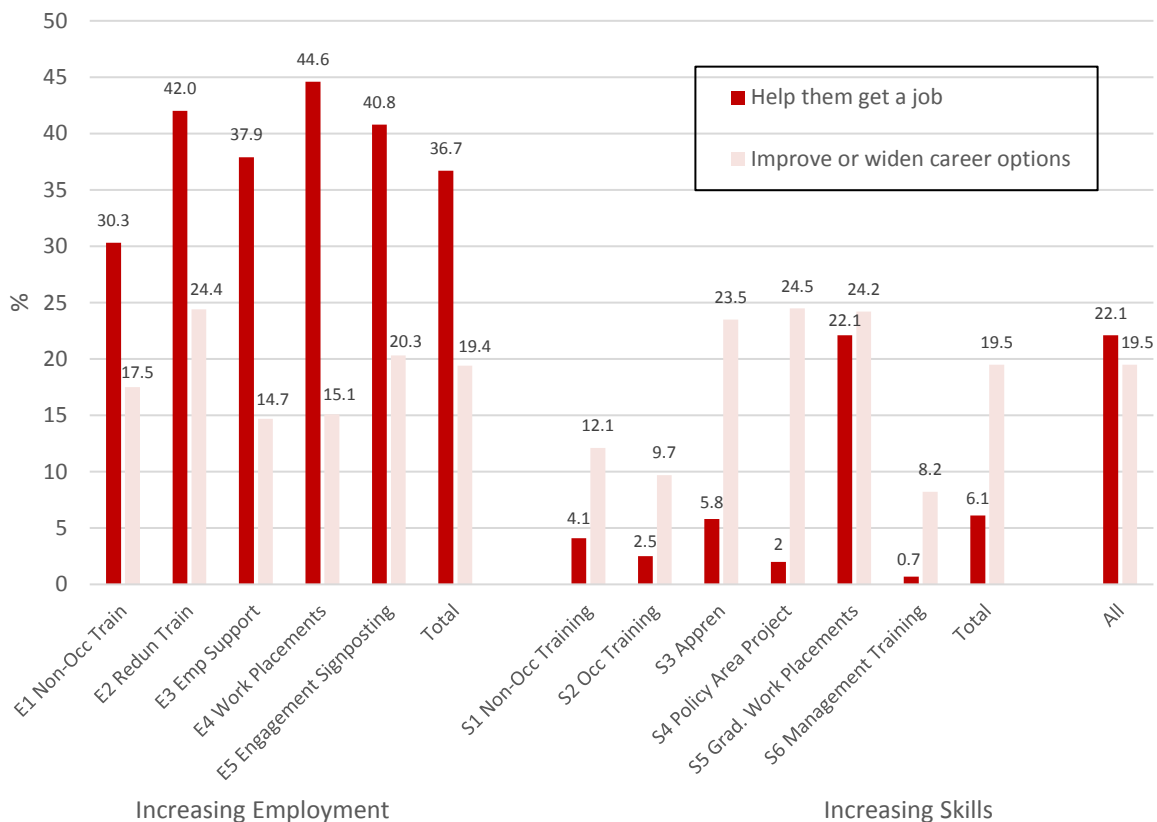
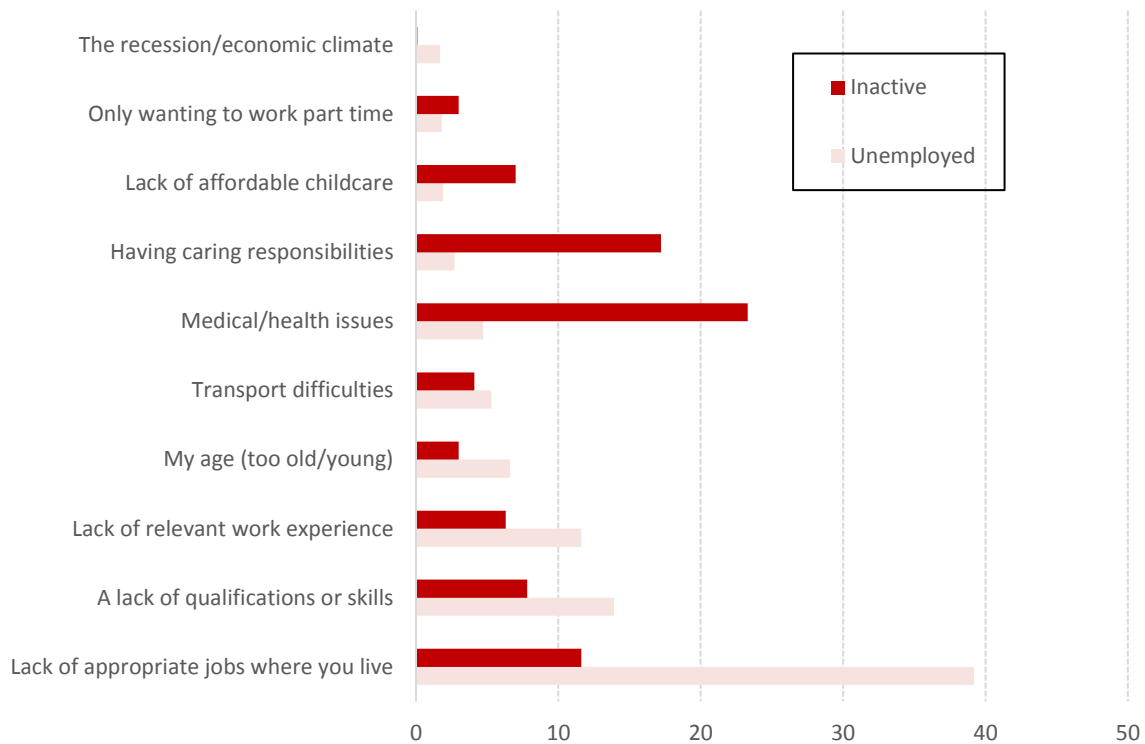


Figure 3: Difficulties associated with finding work, % citing each reason



What happens to ESF participants after their training?

As the majority of respondents participating in projects increasing progression in employment (increasing skills) were already employed, analysis of pre and post provision economic activity shown in Table 2 is based just on respondents from projects aimed at increasing participation in the labour market. Prior to their participation, 13% of respondents on 'increasing employment' projects were in

employment. By the time of the survey, 56% were in employment. This 43 percentage point increase in employment is largely accounted for by a movement out of unemployment into paid work. Approximately three in five of those who were unemployed prior to ESF gain employment by the time of the survey.

The largest increase in employment outcomes associated with participation in ESF

projects among the unemployed is observed among those participating in Employability Support projects (associated with a 46% increase in employment outcomes).

The effects of participating in ESF on employment outcomes among the previously unemployed are estimated to be higher for men, older participants and the economically inactive.

Table 2: Prior and current economic activity among leavers from ESF projects aimed at increasing employment in the labour market (%)

Main activity before attending course	Current main activity				Total
	Paid employment	Education and training	Unemployed	Economically inactive	
Paid employment	10.3	0.4	1.4	0.7	12.8
Education and training	3.1	1.9	1.7	0.5	7.3
Unemployed	39.3	3.7	19.6	5.0	67.7
Economically inactive	2.9	1.0	1.4	6.9	12.3
Total	55.6	7.1	24.2	13.2	

Positive Transition	No Transition	Negative Transition	(n=12,348)
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Do ESF participants think that their training helped them to find work or increase their skills?

The ESF survey included a number of questions that asked respondents about the perceived benefits of participating in ESF projects. Overall, approximately three-quarters of respondents would choose to participate in their ESF project again with the value of hindsight. The responses to more detailed questions targeted at specific groups are summarized in Figure 4.

Respondents who were employed at the time of the survey and who were either not in employment beforehand or were employed in a different job were asked to what extent they thought that the ESF provision helped them get

their current job. Among those who participated in projects aimed at increasing employment and who were unemployed prior to ESF, 22% reported that ESF had been vital in them gaining their current job. Among those respondents who had participated in projects aimed at increasing skills in the labour market but who had not gained employment by the time of the survey, 23% reported that they had more chance of finding a job in the future.

Respondents who were employed both prior to ESF and at the time of the survey were also asked to identify whether they had experienced any positive

changes in their jobs, whether in the same job or a different job, that could be attributed to their participation in ESF. Among respondents who participated in projects aimed at increasing skills, approximately 9% reported experiencing an improvement in their jobs that could be directly attributed to their participation in ESF.

Figure 4 also reveals that respondents who participate in ESF projects that did not result in additional qualifications generally report the lowest level of perceived benefits, while perceived benefits are generally highest among those who gain a qualification at the same level of attainment

or at a higher level of attainment than that held achieving qualifications as a result of their training course.

Participants in work placement projects generally report the largest improvements in their current jobs compared with those held prior to ESF across a range of measures. These respondents also reported the largest improvements in terms of employment on permanent contracts and a movement away from

prior to their participation. These findings point to the employment in low paid occupations.

Is participation in ESF associated with higher rates of employment?

Respondents to the ESF survey report high overall levels of satisfaction with ESF. Despite these subjective assessments of the benefits of ESF, it is not possible to determine what would have happened to these people in the absence of ESF. To estimate the 'effect' of ESF interventions, the

importance that participants place on

employment transitions made by ESF participants who were not in work prior to ESF have been compared to a 'control group' of people in similar circumstances within the wider labour market. This control group is drawn from the Annual Population Survey (APS), which is a large, nationally representative, survey of individuals within the UK. The results of this analysis are presented in Figure 5.

Figure 4: Perceived benefits of ESF by level of qualification gained

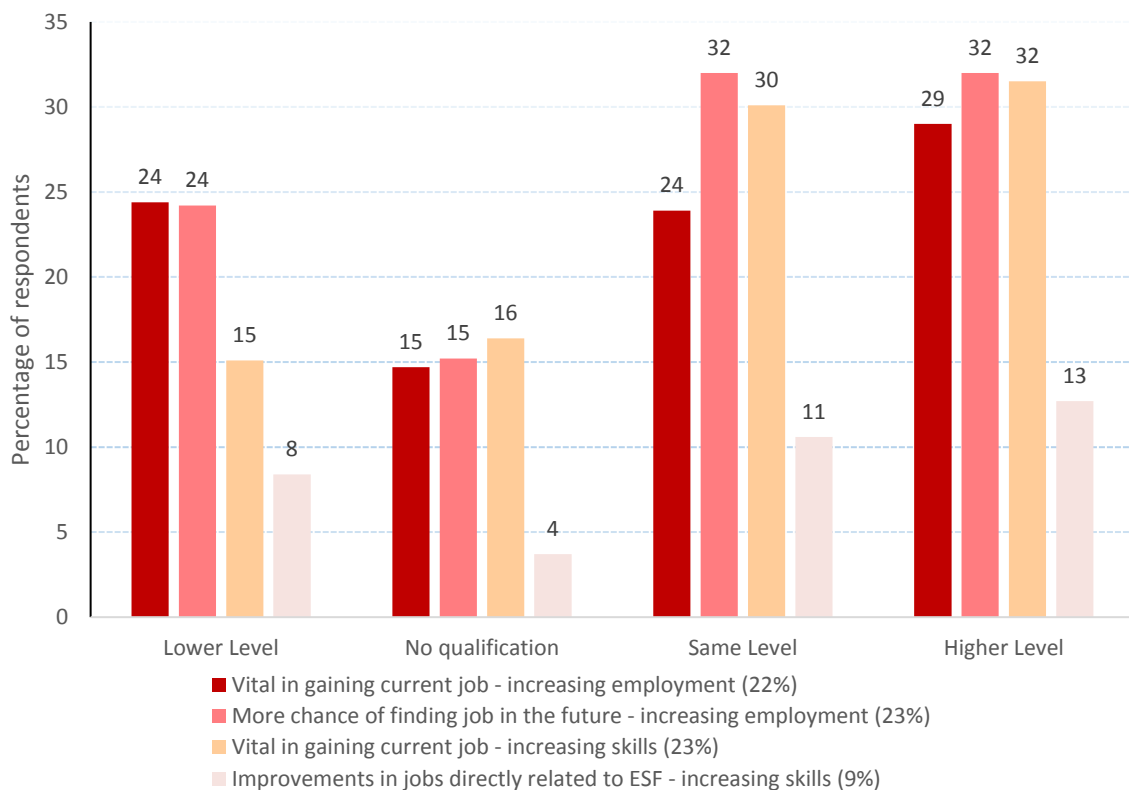
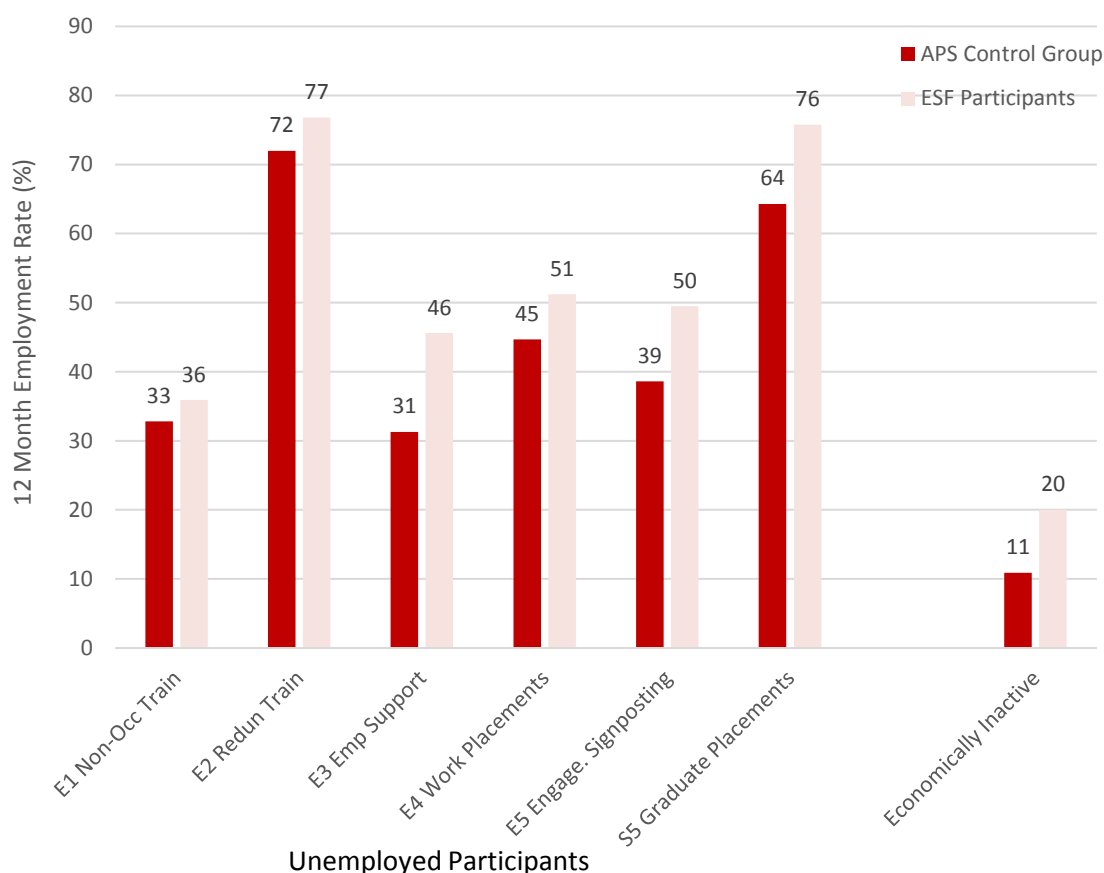


Figure 5: The Effect of Participation in ESF on Transitions into Employment



The analysis indicates that participation in Non-Occupational Training is associated with the smallest differences in employment outcomes when comparing ESF participants with their derived control group. These projects tend to offer training in essential skills (reading, writing IT etc.) and are characterised by participants who are relatively young and who possess low levels of educational attainment. Among participants in these projects, there is an increase in the rate of transition into employment of 3

percentage points (36% among ESF participants compared with 33% among comparable respondents from the APS). This is equivalent to a 10% increase in the proportion of people in these projects getting a job than would have otherwise been expected to do so without the training. This difference was not found to be statistically significant. It must be acknowledged that projects that focus on Non-Occupational or Basic Skills Training may be aimed at moving participants closer to the labour market and may not be expected to result

in transitions in to employment in the short term.

The largest difference in relative employment outcomes is observed among those unemployed who participated in Employability Support projects. Such projects focus on pre-employment job search and soft skills development.

Participants in these projects are characterised by relatively low levels of qualifications (they are most likely to have no educational attainment before ESF). These projects are also characterised by a

relatively older group of participants who relatedly have the highest proportions of long term limiting illness and work limiting illness prior to ESF. Despite these disadvantages, participation in these projects is estimated to be associated with an average increase in the rate of transition into employment of 15 percentage points (46% among ESF participants compared with 31% among comparable respondents from the APS). This equates to an almost 50% increase in the proportion of people on Employability Support projects getting a job than would have otherwise been expected to do so without the training.

The highest rates of transition into employment are observed among those who participated in Redundancy Training, with 77% of participants gaining employment over a period of 12 months. However, the analysis reveals that those made redundant in the wider economy also exhibit high rates of entry into employment. As a result, participation in the scheme is associated with a relatively small (and statistically insignificant) increase the rate of transition into employment of 5 percentage points. Redundancy training however was estimated to be relatively successfully in terms of helping

participants to avoid entering low paid occupations.

Finally, Graduate Work Placements were also estimated to have a relatively large effect on employment outcomes among those participants who reported that they were unemployed prior to participating in the scheme, from 64% to 76%. However, these results are not estimated to be statistically significant.

The results derived from these techniques should however be treated with some caution. It is not possible for statistical matching techniques to control for all the characteristics of participants, including the effects of selection on to the projects. It is possible that the small positive effects associated with participation in ESF interventions on progression into employment could simply reflect the relative employability of those people who either chose, or who were selected, to participate in the interventions. This is particularly important for the economically inactive, among whom participation in ESF is associated with an average increase in the rate of transition into employment of 9 percentage points (20% among ESF participants compared with 11% among APS respondents). This is equivalent to an increase

more than 80% in the proportion of people getting a job than would have done so without the training. Those economically inactive who participate in ESF are likely to be particularly unrepresentative of the wider economically inactive population.

Concluding Comments

By aggregating results from five ESF Leavers Surveys it has been possible to gain greater insight into the characteristics, experiences and outcomes of participants in different categories of project. The analysis also overcomes concerns that the evidence provided by the individual surveys may be distorted by the strong presence of leavers from particular projects.

The research provides further evidence to suggest that ESF interventions in general have perhaps succeeded less well in supporting the most vulnerable groups within, and those furthest from, the labour market. Participants in Redundancy Training were particularly likely to report a strong history of engagement with the labour market, that they were well-qualified and that they had previously held jobs in more highly-skilled occupations. More than half of participants across every other category of intervention aimed at increasing employment said that they

had either been in employment continuously or most of the time since completing compulsory education.

However, across the different projects and over the period studied, ESF

leavers reported a wide range of skills (most notably softer skills such as communication skills, team working skills and organisational skills) which they believed had been acquired as a result of participation. ESF has

helped address some of the essential skills issues within the Welsh economy, and has played a role in adapting the labour market to changing skills needs.

Endnotes

1. See Reports to PMC, June 2013 – Papers PMC (13) 229 and PMC (13) 230 available at: <http://wefo.wales.gov.uk/programmes/allwalespmc/130621pmcpapers/?lang=en>
2. Members of the consortium included Rhys Davies of WISERD, Professor Max Munday and Neil Roche of Cardiff Business School; Mark Winterbotham and colleagues at IFF Research Ltd; and Gareth Williams and colleagues at Old Bell 3 Ltd. The support of WEFO is gratefully acknowledged. The full report of the combined analysis is available at: <http://gov.wales/funding/eu-funds/previous/programme-evaluation/58899873/?lang=en>.